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SUBJECT: PRT NINEWA: NEITHER VICTORS NOR VANQUISHED . . .
HONORING THE FALLEN WHERE MIGHTY ARMIES CLASHED

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[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: The cacophony of modern warfare receded for a day, replaced by the imagined din of ancient armies clashing on an Iraqi plain. Americans and Iraqis walked the ground at Gaugamela where in 331 BC the army of the Alexander the Great defeated that of Darius III of Persia. Soldiers among us relived the military lessons of the campaign; the diplomats considered the epochal implications of when east met west on a bend in the Gomel River at the base of Magloub Mountain. All came together to dedicate a memorial to the fallen and to meditate on youth as the universal currency of warfare across the ages. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) PRT Ninewa supported a May 10 Multinational Division-North staff ride to the likely site of the Battle of Gaugamela, Alexander's third and decisive victory over the Persian Empire. The site favored by most scholars lies just within Ninewa's Shaikhan District, where it joins with Hamdaniya and Irbil. Division Commander MG Caslen led all his brigade commanders and their Sergeants Major; he also invited Iraqi Army Division Commanders (Arab and Kurd), as well as the leadership of the Peshmerga. PRT secured permission from the State Board of Antiquities to place a monument, commissioned the stone via a QRF grant, and obtained the permission of the mayor of Shaikhan to leave the marker on a ridgeline above the field of battle.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) To walk a battlefield in the company of American military officers and NCOs commanding troops in combat is a remarkable experience, one that was not lost on our Iraqi colleagues. Our American military colleagues analyzed the battle with characteristic precision, identifying the key decisions made before and after the fighting began, contrasting the leadership styles of Darius and Alexander, dissecting the role of technology in the campaign, and seeking modern lessons from a battle fought over 2,000 years ago. Our Iraqi colleagues grasped what we were trying to do; they noted that Alexander led from the front, considered his troops to be kinsmen, and fought the battle on his terms. They noted that Alexander, when faced with a crisis of Persians attacking his baggage train, intensified his assault on a breach in the Persian lines, while Darius fled from the scene when the tide turned against him.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) For the marker, we paraphrased an epigram from Simonidis of Ceos, a poet who lived over a century before Alexander and best known for his homage to the heroes of Thermopylae ("Go tell the Spartans, oh stranger passing by, that here obedient to their laws we lie.") In English, Arabic and Kurdish, we carved "near this site in 331 BC, the armies of Alexander and Darius fought the Battle of Gaugamela. Today's soldiers salute the honor-clad noble warriors. You relinquished beloved youth for the rough cloud of war."

[¶5.](#) (SBU) We opted not to mark Alexander's victory lest we remind our Iraqi partners of a western army occupying

Mesopotamia. It turns out we were perhaps too sensitive, fearing that the Iraqis might not appreciate the standard triumphalism of the Alexander legend. Actually, the Peshmerga and IA were proud of Alexander's generalship; one reminded us that Alexander's invading army from the west had at least defeated an invading army from the east.

¶16. (SBU) The retired Peshmerga general who led the staff ride did not share our excessive sensitivity. Indeed, he could not help himself; he just had to insert some propaganda Qcould not help himself; he just had to insert some propaganda of the most un-subtle variety. He reminded all present that when God created mankind, it was in Kurdistan, adding that when Noah made landfall after the Deluge, it was also in Kurdistan. Although we were in the DIBs region, several Peshmerga generals informed us that -- like Adam, Eve and Noah before us -- we were actually in . . . yes . . . Kurdistan. We settled on "we're in Iraq" but with a Kurdish wink that PRT leader pretended to ignore given the delights of standing on a ridge on a spectacular spring day.

¶17. (SBU) In his remarks unveiling the marker, PRT leader noted that Alexander's was the second Greek army to have marched through Ninewa. Some seventy years earlier and 15 miles to the west, Xenophon and 10,000 Greek mercenaries headed north after their defeat at the Battle of Cuneixha. PRT leader thanked PAS Baghdad for supporting the project, and OPA for funding the marker through a QRF grant.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: As we grow older, our soldiers appear to grow younger. As we honor our fallen at ceremonies throughout Ninewa -- five in Mosul three weeks ago, two in Qayarra last week, and one more in Qayarra the day after the staff ride -- it is their dates of birth that stand out . . . 1987, 1988, 1983 . . . young Americans born when we had already reached adulthood and who found a reservoir of courage and sacrifice far deeper than our own. Simonidis reminds us of the reality we face every day; heroic youth is the currency of our statecraft. For their part, Alexander and Xenophon remind us that there is honor in advance as well as in withdrawal. End Comment.

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